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Conducting Large-scale Collaborative Research on Higher Education Finance: An Insider's View

MARIYA IPPOLITOVA, AISULU SANAT & SAGIDA SERIKBAYEVA

National-level reports and programs are written annually but it is rarely possible to talk to the people who actually worked on these documents and find out the story behind them. We were lucky to interview Dr. Ali Ait Si Mhamed, one of the main investigators in the research team on higher education sustainability, who prepared a chapter in the “Development of Strategic Directions for Education Reforms in Kazakhstan for 2015–2020” diagnostic report of 2016. In the current issue, you can find the executive summary of the report but in our editorial, we want to share some insights on the project. First, we asked Professor Ali to tell us a little bit about the project and the people who worked on it before delving into Dr. Ali's views on education in general, and various facets of Kazakhstani education system in particular. In addition to getting an expert's view on the current situation, we were interested in the ways to improve the country's higher education financing system. We ended our interview by asking for a few pieces of advice for young researchers who would like to work on state-level research projects.

It was a four-year project. What has been done during these four years?

We have done a lot of research, including interviews with different institutions. Our choice of institutions was very specific: national universities, joint-stock universities, private universities, state universities, state public universities, pedagogical institutes. We tried to look at the higher education system in general to grasp the issues we are investigating. In addition to that we talked with the ministry officials, we talked with the Financial Centre people, anybody who is involved in the funding of the higher education in Kazakhstan, we tried to reach out to them. So, we have an abundance of good data to look at, and we have also done a lot of desk research, looking at different models in other countries and what that says about sustainability.

Would you mind telling us more about the research team, and the roles you colleagues had in the project?

From the NUGSE [Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education] we have the following project members: Dr. Aida Sagintayeva, as our project leader; I [Ali] coordinated the 2016 Project on Sustainability of Funding in Higher Education in Kazakhstan for which I shared with you the Executive Summary and the actual report that we produced: my main tasks include desk research, data-collection, meetings with experts listed here, and coordinating the writing of the deliverables including the report I shared; Dr. Rita Kasa, who is an expert in Finance of Higher Education and she worked mainly with the research design of the project and data analysis; Dr. Kairat Kurakbayev, from the research institute who served as a liaison between the NUGSE project members and project members from other institutions; Tolkyun Omarova, Researcher who assisted in field work and data-collection; Aidana Abdykulova, Project Assistant and she assisted the project team in all activities needed from the beginning till the end of the project.

Other project members include experts from other institutions nationally and internationally. Dr. Amantay Nurmagambetov, Head, Bologna Process and Academic Mobility Centre, Kazakhstan who mainly worked in describing the situation of Kazakhstani higher education funding with factual data; Dr. Alima Ibrasheva, Head, Department for the Development of Technical and Vocational Education, Information-Analytical Centre, Kazakhstan who enriched the project at hand with very good data and facts; Dr. Hans (J.J.) Vossensteyn, Director and Senior Research Associate, Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, Netherlands who served in this project as the external expert. He came to Kazakhstan for a site visit and data collection. After he heard from different stockholders and officials of higher education, he conducted an in-depth comparison of Kazakhstani context to other countries experiences and drew conclusions and recommendations on that comparative basis.

As your project was commissioned by the Ministry of education, what additional obligations were imposed on you and the team?

To be honest, we were free to think in the box and outside of the box. I think we were expected to come up with something that benefits the country, we were not restricted. We were given freedom to investigate and examine the situation and bring policy options and recommendations to the table for discussion. This experience is definitely different than some former experience I had had. I worked in some projects before where there were some 'dictations' about what I should write even if my findings and my data did not lead to that. Of course, I kept my integrity as a researcher and did not accept the dictations. But it is often unpleasant to be in situations of this kind. With this project, the mission was more of "please, we need help, tell us what we need to do" and that's what we did. We kept our research design under control, we collected good data and we used good available database to draw some interesting conclusions and draw good recommendations from those conclusions.

If there was one thing you could change in the education system, Kazakhstan or all over the world with the snap of your fingers, what would it be?

If you limit me to one thing I would say... I think we always have to look at the funding model we are using in the country because it is going to influence a lot of other decisions, including curriculum, including organization, including governance, management and so forth. The funding model is very important in decision-making. *Snaps* [That's the snap of the fingers]. In fact, this project is about the sustainability of the funding for the universities and you will see that in the details of the report.

But that was one thing, what if we add two more things, for example?

If you have to add two more, the second one in addition to funding is to look for the right people in the leadership for the right job. You may have funding, you may have a good organization, you may have a good management, but if you don't have the right people who understand change and who are going to lead the reforms in these organizations, including funding allocations, it is going to be very difficult for institutions to prosper. The right leadership is key to success of institutions and organizations.

Could you please briefly talk about your impressions of higher education institutions you have visited so far?

I have visited state universities, pedagogical institutes, national universities, joint-stock universities and also some international universities. So, my general impression from visiting these universities, especially state universities is that people there... People want to know how to do things. They want to know how to do research, they are eager and motivated, but most of them don't have skills overall. They want to know and they want to acquire skills for writing articles, publishing, competing for grants, etc. I think the country has to capitalize on the fact that people are motivated and give them chances to learn and do. One way to help is to make sure these people are not competing for a grant for research. They might not know how to do that yet. But allocate some research money for them to conduct small-scale studies. For instance, the government can allocate an amount of one thousand dollars for specific faculty each year, or 200,000 tenge a year for several small research projects in science, social sciences and arts that may lead to publication, partner these researchers with some experts in universities such as NU and KIMEP, where research is already being actively done. Keep them involved. It is important. Even more, running professional development on research activities for experience sharing between institutions is a big plus.

What are some of the the issues present in the current educational system in Kazakhstan?

One of the problems is that the government agencies responsible for the development and prosperity of the country need to be focused in achieving goals set. In relation to the government, I feel that Kazakhstan is in a period of time when they are striving for information on how to do things and solve issues. And the problem with that is they reach out to many consultancy agencies without selecting the 'know how' agencies for specific issues. For example, they reach out to OECD, World Bank, and other organizations that can consult them on similar issues. Once they get all these results and recommendations, they don't know what to do with them. In investigating

equity and equality in distributing financial aid (i.e. grants and scholarships), if the project is given to the World Bank, they may recommend that socioeconomic status data is required for allocation of scholarships; OECD, on the other hand, may say recommend they a series annual data collection on recipients and non-recipients is needed to inform future allocations. These are just examples. Now, the government faces a dilemma as to who is right and who is wrong: World Bank or OECD? And which one are they going to believe? What happens in this case is that governments usually go with the easiest solutions and the solutions they can understand and they have resources for.

However, the right way to receive consultancy is to make sure the government has goals they need to achieve and by when; come up with specific and exact terms of reference of what is to be researched; look at profiles of consultancy organizations to see which organization is qualified to provide consultancy on these terms of references and then go from there to hire the organization. World bank for instance is much more efficient in studying issues of financial aid distribution. There are a lot of studies that prove that. Being informed in consultancy agencies solves 50% of the problems the country needs solutions for and, I believe, the role of the government is to be well-informed about who can and who cannot help.

Can you give an example?

Clear Terms of Reference are very important in conducting good consultancy projects. I have done consultancy with the World Bank before. When I would arrive in the country where we need to work, I would sit with the ministry members who are in charge and they would emphasize the reason(s) as specific as possible for me to understand what exactly they seek to know. In one of my consultancy projects, I remember the Deputy Minister saying to me: “the reason you are here is that we are graduating only 11% of high-schoolers. How can we graduate 30–40%? That’s why you are here”. Ok. To me the task was clear enough to start working on what I needed from them such as data and what I needed to do to answer their question. This clarity between the consultant and the client (i.e. the government agency) is as important as doing the work needed. I would like to see this clear relationship between the government and the consultancy agencies here in Kazakhstan.

What do you think is the role culture plays in the way changes are introduced in the country?

There is a strong culture in Kazakhstan which determines how things should change. No doubt about that. But the part of the culture that’s interesting to me is that Kazakhstani people want that change happens fast. And I think it is not only the Kazakhstani culture, it is a Central Asian culture that people want results like this (snaps his fingers). Right away. And when they ask you to work on something and you do it, they look at the outcomes of your investigation and if they don’t match their expectations for the change they imagined, they are like “ok, is that it?” The most important aspect in change is to understand that it is a slow and a step-by-step process. For example, in order to achieve equity or efficiency you need steps. We need to understand all the steps first (which is a study on its own). Then we work as consultants/researchers with the government to achieve the first step; then in two years’ time after we secure our first achievement, we work on the next step and so forth. Achieving equity in higher education requires lots of work, and lots of structural and cultural changes, and time is the key to achieve all this. The mentality has to change towards how you want to achieve goals and outcomes and if that happens that would be great. This is for the government. On the part of the students, there is a huge culture that takes place and makes it very difficult sometimes for students to make decisions. I have students in a Master’s program and Ph.D. who have done this kind of research that shows that parents actually intervene very much in making decisions for their kids about what to study. This cultural issue alone may challenge efficiency and equity.

If you had to pick one country that would be an ideal model for Kazakhstan, what country would that be?

That’s a very difficult question to answer because my principle is that we should not borrow policies from countries and apply them to other countries. The context is different, the cultures are different, the economic development processes in the country have to be taken into account. I will still try to answer your question by saying that there are definitely quite a few countries that

stand out as models for Kazakhstan when it comes to one part of the funding versus the other. If we think about the budget, these are most European countries, especially Bologna process countries, and I'm talking about France, Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and so on. We also have other models in Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway in some other aspects of funding. Another interesting model that stands out when we talk about student loan programs is Australia. Income-contingent loans scheme is a much more model I see fitting the situation of Kazakhstan. This model seems to be applicable to many other post-soviet countries such as Baltic States. I have done some research in those regions and concluded that the similar loan scheme can also fit there. So, overall, there are many country models and policies to *learn from*, but I do not recommend borrowing policies. I recommend learning from the models and work on adapting and adopting policies learned to Kazakhstani context. In other words, examine models out there and see what works and what doesn't work for Kazakhstan.

Can you tell us a bit more about the Australian student loan programs?

The Australian model, which is also a UK model since 1998 is an income contingent loan scheme. Most loan schemes may fail or default because simply the borrowers are not able to repay the loans. In other words, if the repayment arrangements are possible and easier to make, the loan scheme is often a good one. That is exactly the case of the Income Contingent Loan. It is a clear arrangement for the repayment of the monthly loan amount to be paid by the student borrower based on his or her income after graduation and after the grace period. So, the ability of the student to repay the loan is not a burden on his or her since loan repayments are based on their income during the life of the loan repayments. Simply put, if the new graduate's salary is \$100, they would pay as small as 2% of the \$100 back. This is just an example to clarify the repayment arrangement we talked about. If the graduate salary is \$1,000 they would pay a bit higher, but manageable percentage for the loan, probably as high as 5% for instance. The higher the income, the better the repayment arrangements of the loan back to the lender (i.e. government or bank). This is a very good model for Kazakhstan I believe because salaries are not high for most part. And often in the case of lower income, the best model is a percentage from the income as the repayment of the loan. In addition, this loan scheme serves two main purposes: 1) borrowing is available for everyone who needs to get a loan and that increases access and participation in higher education; 2) the repayment arrangements are not challenging for the new graduate since they are based on income.

I also want to see some other models of loan schemes that encourage equity in the country. Kazakhstan's rural areas are vast and they are in need of professionals who can sustain the development. Villages need doctors, teachers, nurses, etc. Creating a student loan which can turn into a grant or even that can be forgiven based on some service to rural areas would be very beneficial for the country's development. For instance, if a doctor, after his or her graduation, opts for working in a rural area and serve the community there for a period of three years, why *not* forgive their loans! I think their service to those rural communities would pay off as a service that contributes to the development of those regions. Why don't we forgive loans for teachers who are willing to increase literacy and educate small children in villages and country sides? All these are incentives that the country may want to think about moving ahead to design an equitable financial aid package which should include a popular student loan program.

For future or current researchers, we would like to know more about how to obtain grants for this kind of research. Do you write a proposal for the ministry or you obtain an order from them? What is the procedure for writing such a big research project?

This is the project you apply for as an organization, research institute or GSE, and so forth. It is not an individual research grant. Before you apply it is vitally important to think about a team that will achieve the deliverables and do the research. That's key to successful grant application and grant work. In this sense, this grant is not different from the one you apply for as an independent researcher.

For the one you apply for as an independent researcher or a faculty member, you often have to try to find a topic that is a timely topic to investigate in the country; then you put the team of researchers together (if you want to); then you write the application in a persuasive and clear way

that everyone who reads will understand what you are going to do and what you are doing to achieve. You also want to make sure that the grant budget is not too much money, and it is not too less money for what you want to achieve. After you apply, you just hope that you have persuaded the grant funders enough to consider your application. For example, when I came to Kazakhstan four years ago, topics that I saw as more important in 2014 are not similar topics in 2018 because there has been lots of changes already that have happened within 4 years' time. So, I have been following regulations and changes happening in the area of higher education governance and funding management, which is the area of my research. When I saw the Ministry call for grants, I already had a list of topics which I thought would qualify for funding. I, then decided that academic credit based per capita higher education funding may be the most current and the most pragmatic topic to prioritize for the Ministry grant call. I formed a team of six people. We wrote the grant and it received a high mark from the National Council for Science. We are in the process of getting ready to hopefully sign the contract with the Ministry and start our grant work.

The point with research and grant applications is that researchers have to keep themselves updated on what's going on in the country, what is important and what is not, and what's the priority and what is not, etc. Updating oneself and keeping up with reading keeps the researcher in the loop and gives him or her chances to win grants and do good research.